

## EU backs off from taking Iran to Security Council

AFP, Vienna

The European Union has agreed to give Iran more time to negotiate on its nuclear program in a move that postpones taking Tehran to the UN Security Council for violating non-proliferation safeguards, a British envoy said yesterday.

Talks on a Russian proposal to allow Iran to conduct uranium enrichment, but in Russia and not in Iran in order to keep Tehran from obtaining nuclear technology crucial in making atom bombs, will now take centre stage.

Speaking for the EU presidency at a UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency board meeting, British ambassador Peter Jenkins still warned Iran against making any "unilateral moves" to increase its atomic activities.

The European Union and the United States charge that Iran is, despite its denials, using its drive towards atomic energy for electricity generation as a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

In Tehran, Iran claimed victory. "United States defeated over sending Iranian dossier to Security Council," trumpeted the headline in the conservative daily Jomhuri Islami.

Jenkins told reporters the EU had "acceded to the request of several (IAEA) board (of governors) members who have asked for more time for diplomatic dialogue on the future of Iran's nuclear program."

The IAEA's board of governors was meeting in Vienna to review progress

since it found Iran in September in non-compliance with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a finding that requires eventual referral to the Security Council for possible international sanctions.

Jenkins said Iran should "seriously" consider the Russian compromise proposal.

But Jenkins warned Iran needed "to implement the confidence-building measures" for which the IAEA has called, namely to cease uranium conversion work that is the first step in enriching uranium into what can be nuclear reactor fuel or atomic bomb material.

He said Iran should "refrain from any further unilateral move which could aggravate the situation," a clear reference to it moving on to actual uranium enrichment.

Jenkins said in a speech to the board "that any resumption of enrichment related activities at Natanz (an enrichment facility) would seriously aggravate the situation created by the resumption of activity at Isfahan," the conversion facility.

Jenkins said in his press comments that the EU also "sees grounds for deep concern" that Iran "has admitted to having in its possession a document which was supplied" by an international black market and which is a guide to making the explosive core of an atom bomb.

Jenkins said the opening for talks, and the IAEA's holding off for now on referral, should not be misunderstood

by Iran.

"Iran should not conclude that this window of opportunity will remain open in all circumstances," Jenkins said.

EU-Iran talks collapsed in August when Iran broke a suspension of uranium conversion it had begun nine-months earlier in order to start the negotiations on guaranteeing it would not make nuclear weapons.

"There is the hope that there will be resumed negotiations", a European diplomat, who asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue, told AFP.

"The action is elsewhere," a diplomat said, referring to plans by Russia and the EU negotiators -- Britain, France and Germany -- to meet with Iran on December 6, probably in Vienna or Moscow, to break the deadlock.

A non-aligned diplomat close to the IAEA said the Iranians are "keen" for the talks.

Iranian ambassador to the IAEA Mohammad Akhondzadeh told AFP that his country was "optimistic" a December meeting would be held but said: "We have not received an invitation yet."

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said in Washington on Tuesday that the United States had made progress in mustering support from countries such as China and Russia to insist on a crackdown on Iran, even with a compromise solution.

## US mulls troop cuts in Iraq Insurgents can be 'part of solution'

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

The Pentagon plans to shrink the US troop presence in Iraq, currently 155,000, to about 138,000 after the December 15 Iraqi elections and is considering dropping the number to about 100,000 next summer if conditions allow, defence officials said on Wednesday.

But officials said a variety of planning scenarios, including the possibility of no cut in troop levels, are being reviewed based on political and security conditions in Iraq and progress in developing US-trained Iraqi security forces.

The officials stressed no decisions had been made. This comes amid intensifying debate in the US Congress over whether US troops should be withdrawn after 2-1/2 years of war in Iraq.

"The United States military looks at the full range of things that could occur in Iraq and makes plans accordingly, and makes plans for conditions that would lead to a smaller coalition force as well as conditions that would lead to a larger coalition force," said Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman.

Whitman said the plan was to drop back to 138,000 troops, considered the recent baseline level for the US force, following the December 15 elections in which Iraqis will select a

new permanent government.

The Pentagon increased US troop levels in Iraq ahead of the October 15 referendum in which Iraqis approved a constitution, and the US force peaked in October at about 161,000, the highest level of the war. After temporarily dropping by several thousand troops, the size of the US force again is rising to help provide security for the December 15 elections.

In March and again in July, Army Gen. George Casey, the top US commander in Iraq, predicted a "fairly substantial" reduction in American forces next spring and summer if Iraq's political process goes positively and progress is made in developing Iraqi security forces. Pentagon officials said in August that meant a reduction of perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 troops from the level of 138,000 then in Iraq.

Earlier a top US military spokesman called Wednesday for parts of Iraq's raging insurgency to be brought into the political process, while insisting that al-Qaeda was being hit hard by ongoing offensives.

"We understand the capabilities, the vulnerabilities and the intentions of each group of the insurgency -- the foreign fighters, the Iraqi rejectionists and the Saddamists," Major General Rick Lynch told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Queen Elizabeth II crosses the street next to Maltese President Edward Fenech Adami as she arrives in Valletta Wednesday. The Queen begins a state visit to Malta before opening the 53-nation Commonwealth summit. The summit will begin today and put focus on terrorism and preparations for the upcoming WTO talks in Hong Kong.

## Saddam's defence team to attend trial

AP, Amman

Saddam Hussein's defence lawyers will attend next week's trial of the toppled Iraqi dictator and seven co-defendants, dropping a threat to boycott the proceedings because of the recent assassination of two team members, a spokesman for the defence said yesterday.

"All the lawyers will attend the trial on Monday and a decision has been taken not to leave the president alone," Issam Ghazawi told The Associated Press, referring to Saddam as president.

"We will not allow the court to appoint other lawyers," Ghazawi said. "The lawyers are forced to attend the hearings, despite serious threats on their lives, but they want to do that to serve justice."

On Oct. 20, the day after the trial began, attorney Saadoun al-Janabi was kidnapped by masked gunmen. His body was found the next day with bullet holes in the head.

On Nov. 8, defence lawyer Adel al-Zubeidi was killed in an ambush and a colleague, Thamer al-Khuzaiya, was wounded. Al-Khuzaiya fled the country and asked for asylum in Qatar.

The defence has asked the authorities for increased protection and threatened to boycott the trial unless this was provided.

Were the defence lawyers to boycott the trial, the Iraqi High Tribunal would ask "standby" lawyers from its own Defence Counsel Office to step in, a US official has told The AP in Baghdad.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi boy looks from an opening in a wall caused by mortar shells that slammed into a residential area in central Baghdad, injuring three civilians Wednesday.

## MASSIVE TOXIC SLICK China govt, company officials apologise

AFP, AP, Beijing

A senior Chinese government official and an oil company representative have publicly apologised for an environmental crisis in the country's northeast, state media said yesterday.

Jiao Zhengzhong, vice governor of Jilin province, said sorry to the people and businesses of Harbin city in neighbouring Heilongjiang province who are under threat from a massive toxic slick, the Beijing News reported.

"We are deeply, deeply sorry," the paper quoted Jiao as telling Heilongjiang deputy governor Shen Ligu.

The 80-kilometer-long (49-mile) slick of benzene, which is moving down the Songhua river that provides Harbin with most of its water, was caused by a

massive explosion at a PetroChina benzene factory in Jilin on November 13.

PetroChina's parent company is China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC), the nation's largest oil company. It also issued an apology to Heilongjiang's people over the disaster, said Xinhua news agency.

The company "deeply regrets" the pollution caused by the explosion and will be responsible for handling the aftermath, CNPC's deputy general manager Zeng Yukang was quoted as saying.

The carcinogenic chemical reached the outskirts of Harbin on Thursday morning, contaminating water supplies for up to four million people. Mains water has been turned off till the slick flows downstream.